

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## *Hinduism in India and the Caste System*

**Hinduism** is derived from the Persian word for Indian. It differs from Christianity and other Western religions in that it does not have a single founder, a specific theological system, a single system of morality, or religious organization. Many outsiders influenced the development of Hinduism, especially the **Aryans**, who came to India in 1500 and brought with them their religion of **Vedism** and the **Vedas**, a large body of oral literature, preserved orally and in texts, which were sacred. These beliefs became mixed with the indigenous Indian native beliefs.

The **Caste System** began in India after the Aryans invaded and established their own rules for governing the society. The Aryans prohibited marriages between their own people and people of the cultures they conquered. From 1000 to 500 BC, four classes of people emerged in India. Really there are 5 groups, however the untouchables are considered so low that they aren't even counted.

Each caste had its own specific place in society. They socialized, ate, married, worked, and worshipped within their own caste. They would never consider marrying or working outside their caste.

The castes:

### Upper Class

**BRAHMAN** (Pronunciation: Bra-Men): Included priests and scholars (teachers, intellectuals, etc.)

**KSHATRIYAS** (Pronunciation: Sha-Tree-Uh): Included rulers (government) and warriors (military)

### Middle Class

**VAISYAS** (Pronunciations Vi-See-Uh): Included merchants, traders, and farmers (higher level workers)

### Lower Class

**SUDRAS** (Sue-Dra): Peasants bound to the land (work for the farmers, artisans)

**Untouchables:** (work in sewers, work with leather [leather is considered filthy because it typically involves killing cows], and cremation)

Although the caste system was **abolished by law in 1949**, it remains a significant force throughout India, particularly in the south (especially in the countryside). Humans are perceived as being trapped in **samsara**, a meaningless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth (**reincarnation**). **Karma** is the sum of ones good and bad deeds and this determines how you will live your next life. Through pure acts, thoughts and devotion, one can be reborn at a higher level caste. Bad deeds can cause a person to be reborn as a lower level, or even as an animal or an insect. The unequal distribution of wealth, prestige, suffering are thus seen as *natural* consequences for ones previous acts, both in this life and in previous lives. (they can't complain about the system because they are responsible for where they ended up)

Answer the following questions using the reading. Complete sentences are not necessary.

1. In the caste system, which group of people fit into the Upper Class society?
2. What professions do the members of the upper class hold?
3. What is the name of the middle class?
4. What professions do the middle class work in?
5. How could one enter a higher caste?
6. If one's karma is bad, what might happen?
7. The Vedas is a collection of work from what group of people?

Thinking questions (what do you think?) Answer the following questions using **COMPLETE** sentences.

1. Do you think the people of India questioned this system? Why or why not?
2. What are some reasons someone may support the caste system? Which caste do you believe was more likely to switching into a different religion like Buddhism?